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ABSTRACT

Photographs and family albums are helpful in marriage and family psychotherapy to aid in the understanding of family processes, relationship patterns, goals, expectations, values, traditions, and ideals. Based on the assumption that a photograph is a form of communication, photography can be used to: (1) examine typical family picture-taking behavior; (2) study family albums; (3) identify self-concept changes; and (4) treat marital conflicts and sexual dysfunctions. Photographs and family albums also function as family icons, visually articulating the meanings of family relationships, while serving to illustrate family continuity and evolutionary change. (Author/BMW)

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THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

IN

FAMILY PSYCHOTHERAPY

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The purpose of the present paper is to explore how photographs and family albums can be used in marriage and family psychotherapy to help understand family processes, relationship patterns, goals, expectations, issues and three generational themes and the values, traditions and ideals of families. A basic assumption is that a photograph is a form of communication that "can be read as if it were a paragraph or chapter in a book" (Hattersley, Richmond Times Dispatch, May 1, 1979). By understanding the language, vocabulary and syntax of photographs, and combining that knowledge with an understanding of the concepts of Bowen Family Systems Psychotherapy, it then becomes possible to approach the study of photographs and family albums to better understand their meaning for our personal and family histories. Photographs contain a wealth of information: not only are the images and relationships depicted important, so, too, are the spaces around the figures. The background can be read as information as to cultural values, traditions and ideals. By combining these two disciplines, we will be able to locate with more precision what is going on in the photographs, and an understanding of ourselves, our families and the photographer, to reveal in the language of systems theory that which is implicit in the images of the photographs.

To assist in the process of helping individuals attain some of the goals of Bowen Family Systems Psychotherapy (1971, 1972), which include understanding of the family and the parts they play in the operation of the family system, the establishment of personal relationships with family members, and getting to know people in the extended family as far back as possible, I frequently find the use of photographs invaluable. Photographs and family photo albums, as well as

family movies, provide the richest sources of collected memories and traditions about the family. Its richness is in part related to the diversity of visual imagery and information it is able to record about the individuals photographed, their relationships and their social-cultural surroundings.

Photographs function to address the question: What does it mean to be a person, a man, a woman, a child, in this family? I would further assert that photographs and family albums are of a prime importance not only for the individuals depicted in the photographs, but for their relevance for the family as a whole. They are signals of family life cycle ceremonies, rituals and traditions which are important for the development of the "identity" of the person involved, as well as indicating the relevance of the event for the development of the whole family, for the "family identity". They are links from the family's past to the present, and an affirmation of the traditions and ideals for the future. They serve as landmarks for a history of continuity and change within the multigenerational family picture. What is chosen to be photographed, recorded and documented for the family photo album reflects the ideals, traditions and values of the family; and the activities surrounding the photographing of the events become as integral a part of family life as the events they commemorate. Through them, the family constructs what Susan Sontag describes as "a portrait chronicle of itself -- a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness" (1977, p.8).

As a family therapist, I am interested in who, what, where, when and how the family chooses to document their existence as a family. This includes

investigating and exploring the boundaries of the family system, the events and ceremonies chosen to be preserved, recorded and remembered, and who is the family historian, and understanding why some people take pictures and document events of family life, and others do not. Given that the camera can capture and preserve a mini-slice of family history, it raises important questions as to the meaning surrounding those activities and the relationships and events that are selected to be rendered into permanent photographic images. The records form the history of the family, documents that can be studied to learn about what this particular family values and what were its commonalities and differences with other families.

Typical picture taking behavior in families occurs at important events in the family's life cycle, such as births, birthday parties, weddings, holidays, vacations and family reunions. Conversely, there is a sharp decrease in the number of pictures taken during periods of family stress, crisis or conflict. Firstborn children are generally photographed more than later children, and most pictures are taken while the children are relatively young and changing. People from all socio-economic classes own cameras and take, keep and treasure their photographs. The size and prominence of pictures and portraits of family members hung in the house also reflects attitudes about the family. Families also tend to take pictures when the events or changes represent progress, when a positive change is anticipated such as cosmetic plastic surgery for a nose job, or to recapture developmental change, such as a loss of a child's baby teeth. Knowledge of these patterns of picture taking behavior is important because departures from

the expected patterns may provide important clues for the therapist and the family about the emotional processes operating in the family. For example, if a second child is photographed significantly more than the firstborn, hypotheses can be raised regarding the child's meeting the expectations of the family in regard to such issues as its sex or attractiveness, or because of some family secret such as illegitimacy, handicap, or disfigurement. Issues such as equality and favoritism are also raised when family members become adamant about trying to keep the amount of photographs of the first and second child about the same (Akeret, 1973; Entin, 1979; Hattersley, 1976; Kaslow and Friedman, 1977, 1978; and Kotkin, 1978).

Titus (1976) suggests that photographs reflect role learning behavior for parents and the quantity and proportion of pictures of parents in the development of parental skills through caretaking activities, such as holding and feeding the child, and the number of solo pictures of the child reflect the transition to parenthood through role playing and/or via ritualization which may also enhance the commitment to the new parenting role. This is a shift from a two person system to a three person system, from a couple to a family unit. While this first transition might reflect learning and recording this new behavior, Titus further suggests that the inclusion of "significant others", defined as grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends, "provides a break in routine, or becomes an occasion to record the family's continuity through the generations, or reflects wanting to have an economical ongoing record of significant others..." (1976, p. 528). My own experience is that the photographs and albums provide important information about the extended family and important relationship systems.

My experience with families and their albums is generally consistent with Albert's observation that "they record only the happy moments...(and) highlight all that is life affirming and pleasurable, while systematically suppressing life's pains" (Milgram, 1977, p. 108). Whether one chooses to interpret the resulting photo albums as thus constituting a "fairy tale...(a) pseudonarrative" (Milgram, 1977, p. 108), "a form of folklore" (Kotkin, 1978), an artifact of family life or a window and mirror through which we view the experiences of the family, what is important is to understand what the album communicates about each family, how all families are alike and how they are different and unique and respond in a variety of ways to similar cultural and life cycle experiences.

One of the most developed applications of the use of photography in psychotherapy has been employed by Zakem (1977). He describes the process as phototherapy, which is defined as an "evolving therapeutic discipline which uses any and/or all photographic material(s) with clients who are experiencing a wide variety of emotional and/or physical stress". Clients at the Ravenswood Hospital Community Mental Health Center can become involved in the process of learning "to read" photographs to uncover the meanings of the relationships expressed and in the process of photographic activities such as picture taking, being photographed and darkroom techniques.

Loellbach (1978) has conducted an extensive review of the literature on the uses of photographic materials in psychotherapy, its historical orgins, contemporary applications and therapeutic consequences. In relation to the viewing

of photographs, she has formulated "some tentative statements" about the potential uses of photographs in clinical treatment: (1) Photographs can provide a permanent visual record of change. (2) Photographs can be used diagnostically. (3) Photographs can yield important historical, dynamic and symptomatic information about the patient, and I would add, about the family. (4) Photographs can facilitate therapeutic effects on the patient in conjunction with therapeutic relationships. (5) Research suggests that photographs cannot be used to measure fixed traits, aptitudes or abilities.

In my own clinical practice, I find that photographs can have their greatest impact within the context of getting to know one's own family of origin, especially my own, and this is one of the most powerful ways in which I use photography. When individuals are trying to get to know their family, to find out about the family myths, stories, events or history, especially when individuals either cannot or will not talk about their past or are reluctant to do so, or as an aid to memory, possibly to revive feelings which they are unable to otherwise verbalize, I suggest that they review photographs with their family to augment the verbal discussions to get clues as to the themes, issues, goals, traditions and values of the family. This activity has powerful effects, both as a process of reminiscing and talking about previous memories and relationships, as well as developing renewed relationships in the present. At times, individuals may express feelings of frustration and hopelessness because of the difficulties involved in obtaining such information from their parents. This, too, is significant and provides further material for them to work with in their families. In one family I am seeing, the wife's mother vigorously denies the existence of any

photographs, although the woman vividly remembers seeing them when she was a child. This suggests that there are some important and intensely emotional issues present, but much ground work in relating to her mother must first be established before such issues can be dealt with openly. The process of attempting to attain the information and relate to her mother, to get less angry or anxious with her than in previous encounters, for example, can also be interpreted as a successful experience, even if the end product, the photographs, are not obtained.

I have also had the unique experience of being asked in a treatment session if I wanted to see some photographs. All excited that the client unknowingly brought in information relevant to my interests, I quickly assented. The resulting photographs were astonishing. The images were of a tie on a dresser, to document how long the woman has complained about her husband's sloppy habits; a black sheet on a window, instead of a curtain, to keep the room dark, which has hung there for the last twenty-five years since her husband works at night; inadequate cabinets in the kitchen preventing her from functioning effectively, and the images went on. Her aim was to elicit support and the thrust of her argument was that the photographs document and, in the eyes of any reasonable person, support her contentions about her husband's unreasonableness. She had not yet learned how to develop responsibility for her own functioning.

I have also used photographs in therapy to study self-concept; to discuss obesity within the context of the family and how one's self-image and feelings of sexuality change as a concomitant to this process. Self-portraiture provides

another avenue to study how people present themselves. With a colleague, Tim Whitehead, who is an artist and social worker, I explored changes in his artwork after he began the study of his Irish family of origin and visited the "family stomping grounds" in Ireland.

Photographs can also be used in the treatment of marital sexual conflicts and sexual dysfunction. In such cases, the size and prominence and whereabouts of family pictures and portraits might function to inhibit sexual activity. Kaslow (1977, 1979) often asks "Who's in the bedroom with you?" to shed light on sexual problems in families.

With one family, an attractive young couple in their late twenties who had been married about a year and were experiencing severe marital conflicts resulting in distance and a lack of intimacy, I suggested they bring in some photos when I learned that this was the second marriage for each and they had been college sweethearts before either married. The consistent theme had been their lack of emotional involvement with each other. While one photograph may be an accurate mini-slice, characteristic of the relationship or just happenstance, the accumulation of pictures begins to reveal the threads of consistent themes and patterns; they tell a story, the story of the family. At their wedding, they appear to relate to each other through her daughter by her previous marriage, a triangle. While generally corny and staged, even the wedding album photographs, however, can be revealing. On they way to the honeymoon, the bedroom upstairs at her parents previous residence, the couple smiles gaily

and eagerly on the bottom step. But, as the destination was approaching, the relationship pattern emerged immediately: she wants closeness and intimacy, and he is distancing and pulling away from her; this pattern was to persist in their relationship and culminated in their divorce. The verbal interpretation was consistent with the visual communication. Interestingly, in his memory of the wedding photographs, he is positive there is a picture of him pulling her up the stairs, with her resisting. That picture, if it exists, however, is not included in the "official wedding album". It is often significant as to which pictures are selected for inclusion in the documentation of events, which are left in the yellow kodak envelopes, and which are discarded completely. What these choices reveal about the family system is important, as are investigations of an individual's "favorite pictures" which reveal their view of the family system.

Favorite pictures of one's self, spouse, children and parents are significant in helping to understand their view of the emotional processes operating at the time within the self and family. Other leads for investigation involve speculating about what is happening in the picture at the time, the people, relationships, events, clothing and other items in the pictures, what the people may have been thinking and feeling about the events, what happened just prior to the picture and following the picture. Also, charting a relationship process by viewing the same people or events in a series of photographs over time, noting changes in who is included and absent, who stands next to whom and what they are wearing, for example, provides highly significant information.

What events are documented, and how and when the photographs change, are also informative. The dimenstions of time and space, passages and transitions of the family as an expanding and contracting system through births, marriages, separations, deaths and divorces, are all available for observation within the family photo album. Additionally, the use of photographs in therapy raises important theoretical issues concerning the function of the past in facilitating change. My investigations raise more questions than can be answered, but serve to provide leads for further studies.

Most approaches that utilize photographs in psychotherapy have as their explicit goal the reliving and re-experiencing of feelings and memories in a cathartic manner during the psychotherapy session (Zakem, 1978; Kaslow and Friedman, 1977, 1978; Anderson and Malloy, 1976). In contrast, I do not think it is necessary to see and discuss family photographs especially for the purpose of expressing feelings. When I look at photographs with clients, it is for the purpose of trying to understand what is the message of the photographs in the language and syntax of systems theory to see the manifold ways that the family process is expressed in the photographs; it is not for the ventilation of the feelings or emotions. Instead, the ventilation of feelings and emotions for the resolution of longstanding relationship problems should be communicated and worked out in the relationship system in which they were initially experienced within the family of origin. My goal as a family systems psychotherapist is to help the individuals obtain and/or maintain contact with their family of origin and the photographs serve as an entre' to facilitate the process. What becomes necessary

is for the individual to understand systems theory language and concepts which will aid in their interpretation of their family photo albums as they embark on the search for themselves and their family history. Thus, in contrast to the more prevalent uses, in my view, it is not always necessary for the client to bring in the photographs to the psychotherapy session if they can learn and understand the concepts of family systems and then use the pictures as a tool to help them understand themselves and their family.

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